



June 9, 2015

Chairman Thad Cochran
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Ranking Member Barbara Mikulski
Committee on Appropriations and
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice,
Science, and Related Agencies
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Chairman Richard Shelby
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice,
Science, and Related Agencies
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Cochran, Chairman Shelby, and Ranking Member Mikulski:

Although we are policy analysts from organizations with different policy orientations, the two of us agree that the Commerce-Justice-Science appropriations bill for 2016 should include two steps to preserve the integrity of the nation's data infrastructure and the policymaking process that depends upon it. The Senate bill should maintain the mandatory nature of the American Community Survey and it should provide adequate funding for the Census Bureau.

The House-passed CJS bill of last week falls short in both regards. First, it fundamentally changes the nature of the American Community Survey, which has succeeded the decennial census long form as the chief source of demographic data on the needs of neighborhoods, local areas, and small rural communities. The House bill would make participation in the survey voluntary rather than mandatory, as it is now and as the long form was. With voluntary participation, the response rate would decline significantly, contributing to considerable deterioration in the quality of the data collected. This would leave policymakers without solid knowledge of the Americans they are seeking to assist. It would also increase the costs of data collection (including follow-up to try to reach non-respondents). Moreover, while government should always take care to avoid needless intrusion into individuals' privacy, we believe existing privacy protections are already strong. We are not aware of any instance in which ACS respondents – or, for that matter, respondents to any Census survey – have had their privacy violated.

Secondly, the House CJS bill fails to provide the Census Bureau with sufficient funds to carry out its duties effectively. As amended, the bill provides \$731 million for the Periodic Censuses and Programs account, which includes the decennial census and the annual ACS. That's nearly \$89 million below last year's funding level and more than \$491 million (40 percent) below what the Bureau says it needs in 2016 to prepare for the 2020 census and meet its other responsibilities.

These cuts are ill considered. In particular, they jeopardize the Bureau's ability to test cost-effective new technologies and procedures to (among other things):

- Identify new addresses remotely. Census estimates that these technologies, if properly tested and implemented, could ultimately trim about \$1 billion from the cost of sending Census employees to check these addresses on foot.
- Reuse data that people have already provided to state and federal agencies -- for example, to identify which homes are vacant and do not need in-person follow-up visits. That could ultimately save \$1.2 billion.
- Help and encourage people to respond to the census online and by phone. That could reduce the cost of in-person follow-ups by roughly \$500 million.
- Use smart phones rather than costly meeting time to give census takers updated route assignments.

Underfunding such efforts at efficiency could backfire, costing taxpayers more in the long run.

Shortchanging the census would threaten the quality of the information collected. That could affect everything for which communities, policymakers, and businesses use the census -- including planning for new schools, stores, restaurants, highways, home construction, and emergency response measures, allocating congressional seats and redrawing congressional boundaries, and efficiently administering federal funds.

No policy or philosophical outlook is well-served by a lack of accurate data. The alternative to accurate, detailed data on American households is policy-by-anecdote, in which lawmakers respond to perceived needs without data on how large or widespread a problem might be. Such a process would spend federal funds neither effectively nor wisely.

For these reasons, we urge you to provide adequate funding for the census and maintain the mandatory nature of the ACS.

Yours truly,

Andrew Biggs
Resident Scholar
American Enterprise Institute
Andrew.Biggs@AEI.org

Arloc Sherman
Senior Fellow
Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
sherman@cbpp.org